Manitoba
Culture, Heritage
and Recreation
Historic Resources

GRUND LUTHERAN CHURCH

89-05896/

Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Main entry under title:

Grund Lutheran Church. —

Cover title.
Revision of: 1984 ed.
Bibliography: p.
ISBN 0-7711-0856-7

1. Icelanders — Manitoba.
2. Argyle (Man.: Rural Municipality)
3. Grund Lutheran Church (Man.) I. Manitoba. Historic Resources Branch.

FC3400.13G78 1989 971.27'020043961 C89-099308-4
F1065.12G78 1989

Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Recreation

© Historic Resources 1989

GRUND LUTHERAN CHURCH

Built in 1889, the Frelsis Church at Grund is the oldest Icelandic Church in Canada. It still stands as a monument to the faith, the courage and the community spirit of the Icelandic settlers who pioneered in the Argyle district. The history of the church is also the history of the people who built it, who came there to pray in times both of privation and of plenty, and who transformed the beautiful virgin wilderness into the prosperous farmland of Argyle.

The settlers who came to Argyle in the 1880s were not pioneering in new land for the first time, but for the second or even third. Many of them had left Iceland as early as 1872, and had broken land in Wisconsin, or in Ontario. Some had ventured a settlement in Nova Scotia, others had dreamed of an Icelandic settlement in Alaska. And, almost to a man, they had devoted several years to homesteads in New Iceland, the Icelandic reserve in the Gimli district of Manitoba. All their attempts to build a better life in the new world were met with hardship and frustration, but they had the courage to try again.

The reasons for leaving Iceland had been primarily economic. Conditions had always been harsh for this island people, and they were accustomed to the struggle for survival in a beautiful but barren land, where sheep farmers and fishermen lived in isolation, often held prisoner in their turf cottages by inclement weather. It almost seemed that nature conspired against the little nation, for a series of natural disasters just prior to the emigration brought hunger and despair to many. In the years 1856-1860, an epidemic carried off about 200,000 sheep, which was a severe blow to both the economy and the diet of the Icelanders. Then, a series of unusually severe winters made the northern coasts inaccessible, and hardships and privation were thus intensified by isolation. Arctic ice caused winter conditions to prevail in summer on more than one occasion in the north. The disasterous volcanic eruption in 1875 spread ash over an immense territory; a country with so little arable land could ill afford this devastation. Moreover, natural hardships were intensified by political frustrations, for Iceland was at that time a colony of Denmark. It was exploited by Danish trade monopolies and administered by Danish functionaries in Danish interests. It is not surprising that the Canadian Immigration agents, who came to Iceland with glowing accounts of Canadian opportunities, found

many interested listeners. The emigrants saw Canada as a land of political liberty, as well as economic prosperity. Significantly, almost all emigration was from the northern part of Iceland, where conditions had been most severe.

Between 1863 and 1873, some forty people left Iceland for a settlement in Brazil. In 1870, letters written by a Dane describing conditions in America were published by an Icelandic newspaper, and, in response, four people left for Washington Island in Lake Michigan. Six more joined them in 1871. Their letters home were also published, which stimulated further emigration. In 1872, twenty-two people left, most of them going to the settlement in Wisconsin. One of them came to Canada and became a government agent; his name was Sigtryggur Jonasson, the man who was later called the father of New Iceland.

In 1873, 165 people sailed to Quebec, a voyage of twenty days. Fifty of these went to join their compatriots in Wisconsin, but 115 of them decided to stay in Canada and settle in the Muskoka district of Ontario. The following year, 365 immigrants from Iceland joined them at Kinmount. Their journey to the settlement site was rough, and the hot train had to be shared with a shipment of livestock. Twenty people died en route, most of them children suffering from stomach disorders.

The settlers were dissatisfied with the site because the land was poor, and the Icelanders had no knowledge or experience of farming under these new conditions. They had never had to clear land before, for Iceland is denuded of trees. They had never grown crops, and did not know how to cultivate the land, which proved for the most part to be rocky and wooded. Induced by an Icelandic agent of the Nova Scotia government to settle there, some of the group left Kinmount for a disasterous attempt to farm in a district they called "Markland," named after the wooded coasts their ancestors had discovered almost a thousand years earlier. But once again, the site had not been judiciously chosen, and the land could not support the colony.

In search of a more suitable location, Sigtryggur Jonasson and John Taylor, an Englishman who proved to be a life-long friend to the Icelanders, set out west to Manitoba in the company of three settlers: Skafti Arason, Kristjan Jonsson, and Sigurdur Christopherson. They were looking for a settlement site that would provide good land, a lake stocked with fish, adequate employment, forests, and exclusive settlement rights in an area large enough to enable continued immigration from Iceland in later years. The Manitoba Interlake region seemed most suitable. The party had arrived in Winnipeg to see a countryside devastated by a grasshopper plague, but there were hardly any grasshoppers to be seen in the Interlake. The lake, the forests, and the soil seemed promising for a people accustomed to a mixed livelihood of fishing and livestock farming. They returned with op-

timistic reports of the area. Sigtryggur Jonasson returned to Iceland to encourage further migration to the new location, while John Taylor guided the Ontario group.

Sigurdur Christopherson, wife Caroline (nee Taylor) and Family: John, Sigurveig, William, Halldor, Kjartan, Sigurdur, Lily, Caroline, Susan

Sigurgeir Frederickson with a unique Icelandic breed of sheep, brought over by some of the early settlers

The 275 people who left Kinmount in 1875 were joined by thirteen from Wisconsin. The group made its slow progress by steamer, train and flatboats, accompanied on the Red River by the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) steamer *Colville*. A child was born on one of the flatboats under what must have been dreadful circumstances. At last, the group landed at Willow Point, near the present-day town of Gimli, on 21 October 1875. No preparations had been made for their arrival, and it was late in the season. There was not even time to build enough log cabins for the winter,

and the settlers had neither livestock nor provisions. Many spent the first winter living in HBC tents on the flatboats, which were frozen in the ice. The thirty log cabins which had been hastily erected were about four by five metres, and housed two to three families each. They were built of unpeeled logs, plastered with mud; few had floors, and, in a misguided attempt at insulation, some had double walls packed with clay.

A $5,000 loan was advanced by the federal government for the purchase of winter supplies. Fishing was attempted with little success. The Icelanders did not know how to fish under the ice, and the nets they had brought from Iceland were not the right mesh for the lake fish. Scurvy broke out in March, but conditions improved in the spring with the arrival of twenty-two cows, donated by the government. But the people were heartsick after one of the coldest winters on record.

Still, the settlers tried to make the best of things. A local provisional government was already in operation in January 1876 and several issues of a handwritten newspaper were circulated during that first winter. A school, taught by Caroline Taylor, (the niece of John Taylor), was held the first winter. Religious services were held by John Taylor, with a simultaneous translation into Icelandic by Fridjon Fridriksson. Farming operations began in a primitive way that spring. With no horses, no oxen, no implements, except the pick axe and hoe, and no experience, these "farmers" faced the disappointment of seeing much of their first crop fail in ground that had not been adequately prepared. To make matters worse, the summer of 1876 brought snow in July.

That same summer, about 1,200 Icelandic immigrants arrived, most of them destitute. In the fall, the first cases of smallpox appeared in the settlement. The disease reached epidemic proportions. Almost half of the population contracted the illness. Poor facilities and malnutrition lowered resistance to the disease. Three doctors came from Winnipeg, and a provisional hospital was set up in the store house. A quarantine was imposed on the settlement in November, and although the epidemic was over by April, the quarantine was not lifted until 20 July. Only people who had had the disease were allowed to leave the settlement, and were given a complete change of clothing when they left. Once in Winnipeg they were shunned and could not obtain any employment. By the end of January, supplies ran out, and fish was the only food available. Knitted products and other goods could not be sold outside the settlement, and incoming supplies were delayed. As a result, planting had to be delayed that summer. Mail was interrupted, and all letters leaving the settlement were dipped in carbolic acid. On 20 July, the settlers marched to the quarantine line in a peaceful demonstration to protest the unneccesary prolongation of these hardships.

One might have hoped that such difficulties would pull the community together, but instead, almost every aspect of community life was marked by faction. Ironically, the split in the community was delineated along religious lines. Two religious leaders in the settlement, Jon Bjarnason and Pall Thorlaksson, represented the opposing stands on almost every issue, be it political or religious. Thus, the people were divided into two camps, the "Jonsmen" and the "Pallsmen," according to their loyalties. Jon was a Lutheran clergyman who had received his training in Iceland. His teachings followed the liberal tendencies of the Icelandic state church. Pall, on the other hand, had been ordained by the Norwegian Lutheran Synod in Missouri. He was not only of a much more fundamentalist bent than Jon, but he also advocated affiliation with the Norwegian church. By 1878 the split had become so severe that Pall induced many of his followers to leave New Iceland and settle in North Dakota, a move which was deeply resented by those who stayed.

New hardships awaited those who remained. The fall of 1879 brought flooding, and the following winter was terribly severe. The summer of 1880 was cold, and summer frost destroyed much of the crop. Hay was so scarce that cattle had to be driven elsewhere for winter feeding. Then, in November 1880, came the "Great Flood," which was particularly bad in the southern part of the settlement. On one farm, the water rose to the bed of a woman in childbirth, and elsewhere there was extensive damage. Even the most dogged pioneer must have lost heart when he saw his hard-won progress the plaything of such bad fortune.

Isolation intensified these hardships. When the New Iceland site was chosen, it was in faith that before long the railroad would reach the nearby town of Crossing, the present site of Selkirk. By 1880, those plans had changed, and it was clear that the nearest railway line would be Winnipeg for many years to come.

In August 1880, Sigurdur Christopherson and Kristjan Jonsson, two of the first men to explore the New Iceland district, set out to explore land in the Tiger Hills district, now the municipality of Argyle. They had received a letter from Everett Parsonage, who had been in New Iceland and had since homesteaded at Pilot Mound. He wrote enthusiastically about land in the south-west, and the Icelanders were encouraged to consider a move. Many of the settlers wanted to remain in Canada, a country to which they had already come to feel loyalty and gratitude.

Sigurdur and Kristjan travelled by rowboat to Winnipeg, by steamer to Emerson, and then walked for three days to Pilot Mound, where they met Parsonage, who guided them north to explore the country. There were no other settlers in the area, except for two men, A.A. Esplin and G.J. Parry, who were living in a tent. The visitors were impressed by the land, and when Parsonage rode to the crest of a hill near the present site of Grund Church, he galloped back and cried, "I have found Paradise."

Grund: Sigurdur Christopherson's home

At the Nelsonville land office, Sigurdur Christopherson filed the first homestead entry in the Icelandic settlement of Argyle. He called his farm "Grund," which means grassy plain. For many years this farm was to be the centre of community life. Here, Sigurdur ran a small store in the very early years, and the post office at Grund for many years. He and his wife, Caroline (nee Taylor), who had been married by a minister standing across the quarantine line at Netley Creek during the smallpox epidemic in New Iceland, built a fine house at Grund which was renowned for its hospitality. The Grund farm was also the site of the picnic grounds and community hall, called Skalbreid. But this bright future would cost Sigurdur years of hard work, and he set himself to the task that very first summer. After filing his claim, he returned to the site and began his preparations for the move the next spring. In return for his help in building a log cabin, he enlisted the help of Esplin and Parry in putting up hay for the next spring, and then he returned to New Iceland.

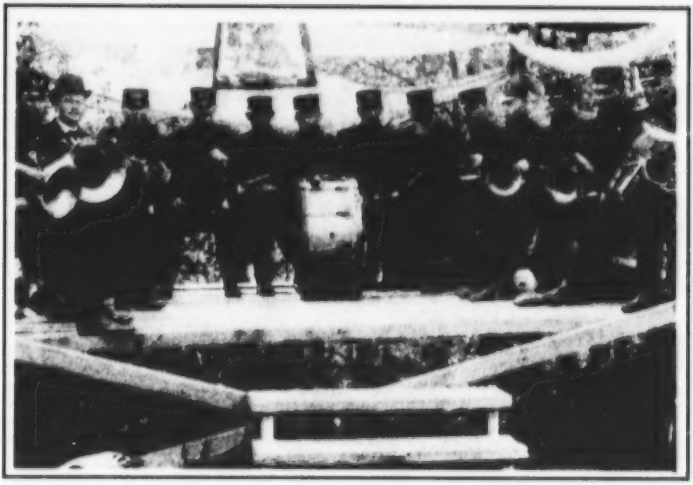
Meanwhile, Skafti Arason and William Taylor (Sigurdur's father-in-law) made the journey to Argyle to select homesteads for themselves and their friends, filing at the newly opened land office in Souris. Two other Icelanders, Halldor Anderson and Fridbjorn Frederickson, had driven 30 head of cattle from New Iceland all the way to Parsonage's for winter feeding, due to the scarcity of fodder in New Iceland. These new arrivals persuaded Arason to show them the settlement site, and afterwards, they also filed claims.

The next spring, in March 1881, the first party set out from Gimli to their new home in Argyle. The first five settlers were Sigurdur Christopherson, Gudmundur Nordman, Skuli Anderson, with his wife and three children, Skafti Arason, with his wife and two children, and Bjorn Jonsson, with his wife and five children. This 323 kilometre journey was made mostly on foot, travelling on the snow and ice, and lasted sixteen days. They had five oxen to pull sleds, and on two of the sleds were constructed rough shelters, each with a stove, in which the travellers huddled for warmth at night. On 1 April, they reached Christopherson's homestead site, and the hay supply he had wisely put up the summer before. By the winter of 1881-82, there were eight families in the settlement, and by the next year there were seventeen families.

Although pioneering in Argyle had its share of difficulties — prairie fires, hail, flood and drought — the district had many advantages over the New Iceland settlement. There were no heavy woods to clear, and there was good haying. By this time, the Icelanders themselves had acquired some farming experience, and as time went by they were fortunate in acquiring some very good Ontario farmers as neighbours, whose help was invaluable.

A factor of enormous importance in the development of the community was the early arrival of the railroad, which came to Glenboro in 1886 and to Baldur in 1889. It brought prosperity, the convenience of nearby markets, new settlers and supplies. Before the arrival of the railroad, the farmers had to take their wheat to Carberry, a distance of about sixty-five

The Ladies Aid at Grund, 1908



The Argyle Brass Band, Albert Oliver, Band Master

kilometres, or to Manitou or Brandon, eighty-one kilometres away. This meant a three to four day trek, travelling in a kind of caravan of several men, their wagons, and their oxen.

The first decade brought a steady flow of settlers, some from New Iceland, some directly from Iceland, and others from non-Icelandic settlements in Ontario. Within ten years the district settled. Sigurdur Christopherson was very influential in stimulating immigration from Iceland, and he made several trips as a Canadian immigration agent, encouraging his compatriots to come to the land which he loved and in which he had so much faith. Many immigrants took his advice, but that is not to say that he was welcome in Iceland. On more than one occasion he was almost thrown into jail by Icelandic authorities who resented his attempts to lure the Icelandic people from their mother country. But many followed him, and by 1890, there were about 700 Icelanders in the Argyle district. Some had been neighbours in New Iceland and in Iceland as well. Both moves were made from areas where conditions had been the most difficult.

At last their efforts were rewarded, for the settlement in Argyle prospered. As early as 1884, Skafti Arason was able to report on behalf of the settlement:

> We have 650 cultivated acres, 260 head of cattle, 62 oxen, 70 pigs, 60 sheep, 9 work horses, 2 ponies, 2 colts, 6 mowers, 6 harnesses, 3 reapers, 2 binders, 1 threshing machine, 13 wagons, 23 ploughs, and 12 harrows.

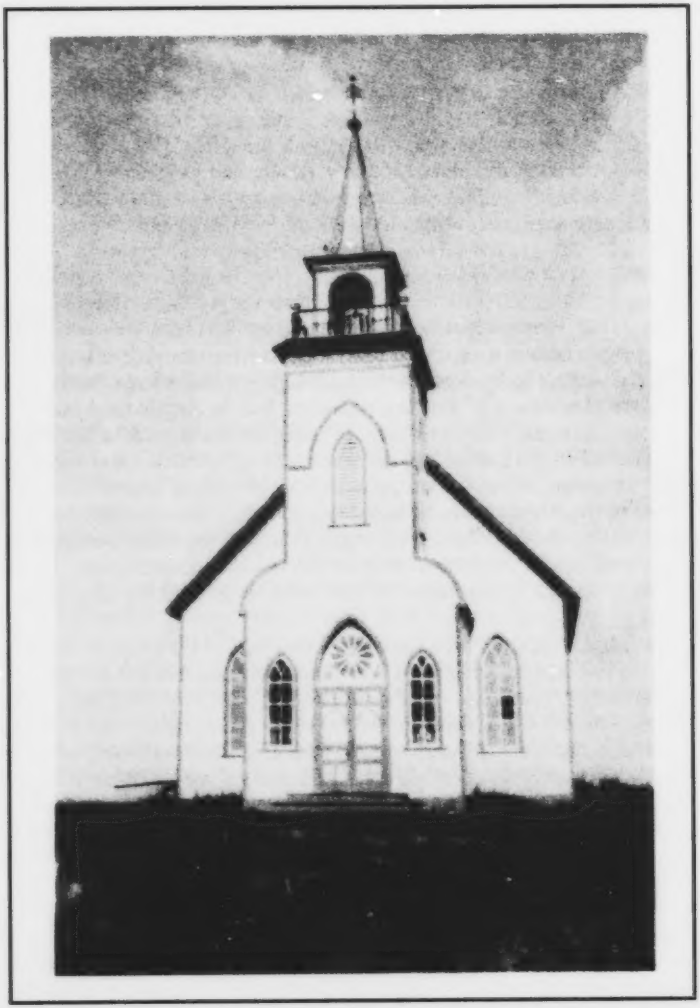
The settlers wasted no time in organizing community life. There were six schools in operation before 1900. In 1885, a Ladies' Aid was organized, which was very successful in fund raising for the church. In 1893, a lending library was established. As early as 1884, a club was formed for the moral uplift of the community. The rules of this club were abstention from alcohol and profane language, as well as abstention from smoking for all those who had not already acquired the habit before joining the club.

Picnics and community festivals were held at the community hall, in which there was a fine raised stage, complete with trap door in the floor, on which Icelandic plays were performed. The Argyle Brass Band, lead by the bandmaster, Albert Oliver, played at many a dance and social event. The people of Argyle still reminisce about one of these celebrations — the twenty-fifth anniversary celebration of the settlement. On 17 June, the Icelandic national holiday, a special train brought visitors from Winnipeg to join in the festivities. Some old timers still remember the horse drawn carriages and democrats lined up at the station to meet the guests, and a race which ensued from the station back to the community hall. After the visitors had caught their breath, a tug of war was fought between the Argyle Icelanders and the visiting Icelanders. The Winnipeg group had a huge, burly man who stood at the end of their line as anchor, but the Argyle team matched him with an equally powerful man, an Irishman by the name of Joe Cobb. Joe was not only a good friend of the Icelanders, but he had also mastered their language. When the strong man from Winnipeg looked down the ranks of the Argyle team, he asked suspiciously, "Eru allir íslendingar?" (Are all of you Icelandic?), for it was a breach of the rules to enlist "foreign" help, and Joe answered with the fluent Icelandic profanity, "Hjaltu kjafti, bölvathur kjaftaskúma!" (Hold your tongue, big mouth.)

This was not the only time Joe Cobb stood behind his Icelandic friends, and the distinctions between different ethnic groups were lost in a spirit of community cooperation. Another story is still told about Joe Cobb's helpfulness toward the Icelanders. In the early years, before some of the Icelanders had learned fluent English, travelling salesmen would come to take advantage of them. When one such fraud got the signature of an unsuspecting Icelander for an outrageous deal on some pots and pans, Joe caught up with the fellow and told him to tear up the contract. The salesman refused, until Joe picked him up by the collar and repeated, "Now tear it up." Needless to say, the contract was torn up.

But community life in the settlement was really synonymous with church life. In the earliest days, religious services and scriptural readings were held each evening in every Icelandic home, as was the custom in Iceland. But when the population had become fairly large, a meeting was held to organize a congregation, and on 1 January 1884, the Frikirkja (Free Church) congregation was established. The Argyle settlers were all supporters of

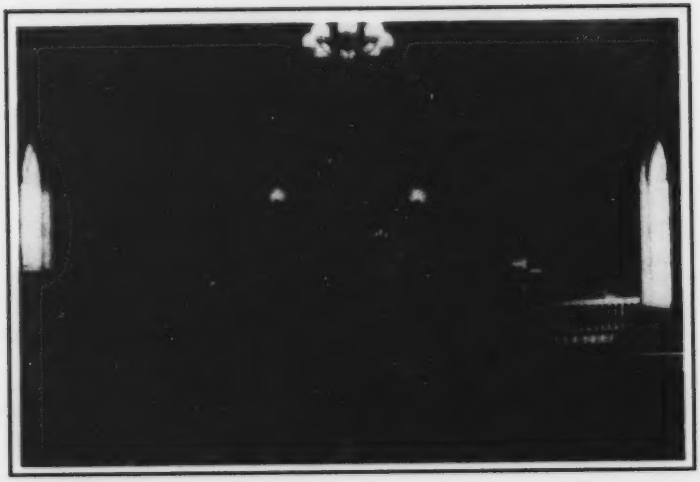
Rev. Jon Bjarnason, so there was no division between "Jonsmen" and "Pallsmen" as there had been in New Iceland. Nevertheless a split did eventually occur, perhaps in some ways due to misunderstandings, but mainly as a result of the large area which the one congregation served.



Grund Church, c1900. The belfry was enclosed by a wooden railing which has since been removed.

The mother congregation remained to serve the eastern part of the settlement, while the new Frelsis (Liberty) congregation was organized in the west. Both congregations were served by periodic visits from Rev. Jon Bjarnason, and services were held in the school house. But the need for a resident pastor and a church building became more acute as the years went

The pews and balcony of the church as viewed from the altar

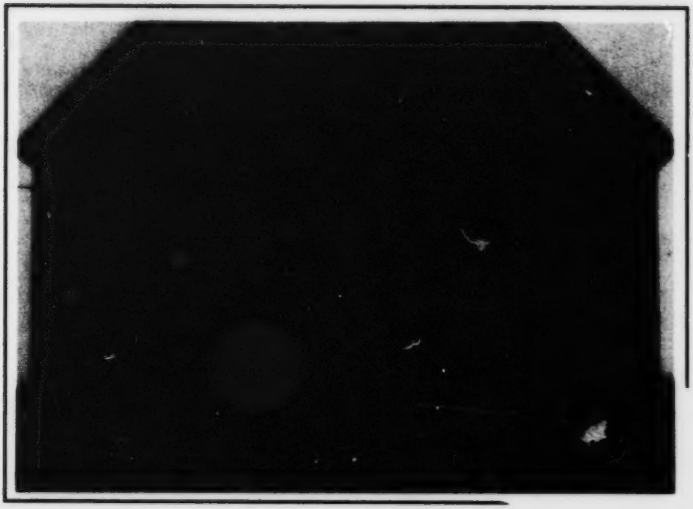


Interior view of Grund Lutheran Church

by, and meetings were held to discuss these issues. At first, there was considerable disagreement about having one church and one minister to serve both congregations, but eventually a compromise was reached. Ninety dollars was collected and sent to Hafsteinn Pjetursson in Iceland. He arrived in 1889 and was ordained in Winnipeg. He served the district until 1893, for a salary of five hundred dollars a year.

Above a decorated frieze, the belfry is crowned by a bell house with a hexagonal pinnacle

Funds were collected toward the church building, and .81 hectares of land were bought for ten dollars. The talented carpenters, Byring Hallgrimson and Arni Sveinsson, set to work with volunteer labour to build the church.



A rose and pointed windows add elegance to the facade of the church

Byring Hallgrimson (1853-1941) was born in Iceland and in 1874, at the age of twenty-one, he arrived in Canada. He and Borga Kristofersdottir were married at the home of Borga's brother, Sigurdur, in the Rural Municipality of Argyle in 1883. The couple made their first home in Winnipeg where Byring, a talented carpenter, worked on the 1882-83 addition of the 1875 Winnipeg City Hall. In 1888 Byring and Borga returned to the Argyle district and bought SW 15-16-4 where they farmed and raised their family. Byring's carpentry skills were quickly in demand. Besides supervising the construction of Frelsis Church with Arnie Sveinsson, an equally skilled carpenter, Byring hand-carved and delicately painted the pulpit.

Arnie Sveinsson (1851-1928) was born at Tunga farmstead, Faskrudsfjordur, Iceland. Prior to arriving in Canada in 1876, he worked as an outfitter and shipwright in his native country. After living in Gimli for almost five years, Arni moved to the Rural Municipality of Argyle. Arni and his wife, Gudrun Helga Jonsdottir, homesteaded on N 23-6-14 south of Glenboro where they became successful farmers and built a beautiful house and barn. Arni's skills as a carpenter were recognized by his work on Frelsis Church, in cooperation with Byring Hallgrimson, Baldur School (1905) and Baldur Lutheran Church (1907).

Byring Hallgrimson, wife Borga (nee Kristofersdottir), Carrie and Emil

Grund Church was completed in 1889. The porch and the belfry were built several years later and its 227 kilogram copper bell could be heard for eight kilometres. The chandeliers were donated, and the beautiful organ, a 1911 "Doherty" was purchased.

Grund Church is representative of late nineteenth century church architecture in rural Manitoba. The wood frame church is built on a simple rectangular plan. The Gothic Revival Architectural style of the church is expressed by a coloured rose and pointed windows. A graceful entrance tower rises elegantly to a slender belfry. This simple but stately edifice became the heart of the community, and served the Frelsis congregation for eighty-five years. Built only eight years after the first five families struggled through a March snowstorm to their unbroken homesteads, the church

Arni Sveinsson

at Grund reveals the progress and the priorities of the little community. It was built before many members of its congregation moved from their log cabins into more comfortable homes. The Icelandic people of Argyle have a loving attachment to the church. Built by their parents and grandparents in a spirit of optimism and thanksgiving, it has served them through years of growth, war, depression and war again. The faith and courage of its congregation led to the prosperity of the present. And this present is the future of which those ambitious pioneers dared to dream.

Gudrun Sveinsson (nee Jonsdottir)

Suggestions for Further Reading

Many comprehensive secondary sources are available to the general reader interested in the history of the Icelandic people in Canada. For a general overview see W.J. Lindal's *The Icelanders in Canada*, (Ottawa: Canada Ethnic Press Federation, 1967). For full and engrossing accounts of Icelandic settlement in Manitoba, see W. Kristjanson's *The Icelandic People in Manitoba, A Manitoba Saga*, (Winnipeg: Wallingford Press, 1965), and Dr. Steinn Thompson's *Riverton and the Icelandic Settlement*, (Riverton: Thordis Thompson, 1976).

Numerous historical articles on early Icelandic settlement, social and cultural life may be found in *The Icelandic Canadian*, published quarterly, by the Icelandic Canadian, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Credits

Special thanks to O.J. Thorsteinson who prepared this pamphlet for publication. Donna Skardal of Baldur, Manitoba, kindly provided the biographies and archival photographs of Byring Hallgrimson and Arni and Gudrun Sveinsson.

Location

To get to Grund Lutheran Church first travel to the Town of Baldur located on P.T.H. 23 located in Southern Manitoba. Turn north off Highway 23 on to Government Road in Baldur and proceed 8.9 kilometres north to the church.